

**NJPSA Position Statement on A-4178 (Lopez)
S-2475 (Ruiz) Before the Assembly Women and
Children Committee
June 9, 2022**

The statewide membership of the NJ Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA) shares the sponsors' belief in the critical importance of early childhood education and the provision of early childhood services to a student's welfare and learning journey. Educational research identifies the first five years of life as a time of enormous growth of linguistic, cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development. Early childhood programs and services, specifically high-quality preschool programs, promote the overall development of a healthy child and prepare that child for better success in school (reduced grade repetition, reduced special education referral, increased high school graduation rates), and in life (higher earnings, ability to hold a job, reduced crime rates, decreased teen pregnancy rates, and more).

New Jersey has taken some important steps toward the provision of high-quality early childhood programs to students in need - from the strong implementation of the Abbott mandate of high-quality early childhood programs to the expansion of that model to other districts and students in need. Governor Murphy has renewed our state's commitment by expanding our preschool programs and by partnering with this Legislature to prioritize increased investments through our state budget. NJPSA supports these steps as the right priority for New Jersey students.

Despite these efforts, we do have a long way to go in reaching the goal of providing high quality preschool programs to all students and families who wish to participate. We also face inequities in the provision of full-day kindergarten in our state, an issue that is often overlooked. **With these and other challenges, we believe it is critically important that our preschool system and our K-12 system be fully aligned, as a single system, in our educational goals, learning standards, curriculum, licensing and qualifications systems, program design, services for special populations including special education services, and facilities requirements.**

Our Concerns

In this context, we must share some concerns about the educational impacts of the proposed Department of Early Childhood created by S-2475. We agree with its strong focus on early childhood, including the health, safety, welfare, childcare and family needs of our youngest students. **These may be better served by a new agency. However, with respect to the provision of public education PreK -12 in New Jersey, we have concerns about bifurcating our educational system between two state agencies** for the following reasons:

1. **Recent educational research is focusing on the importance of preschool to grade three alignment**, i.e. the range of policies and practices designed to put our youngest children on a positive developmental pathway that takes what they learned in preschool and builds on it through the early elementary years. An important goal of this work is to address the finding of a number of studies that the positive learning gains of preschool may “fade out” as children progress through elementary school - absent an integrated educational system.
Since our work on the educational front must be aligned in so many areas to be most effective for our students, it makes sense to have the education work of early childhood reside within the NJDOE, hopefully on a strengthened focus and better-staffed basis.

2. **As leaders and practitioners, we understand the critical importance of alignment in our educational policies and practice, not only in early childhood but across education.** Since 2018, NJPSA has been working with the NJDOE and ACNJ on this exact issue through a multi-year grant with the positive outcomes of increased communication across grade levels, increased district policies around preschool to grade three alignment in curriculum, instruction and assessment, enhanced knowledge and implementation of NJDOE early childhood guidelines, and enhanced leadership training to approximately 60 schools and 350 early childhood educators through the Transforming Early Childhood Leadership Institute.

3. Statewide, our members’ work priorities in early childhood have focused on:
 - The provision of high-quality programming,
 - The alignment of preschool programs, standards and curriculum to the K-3 programs offered in district,
 - The transition of students from preschool to the K-3 environment,
 - Hiring highly qualified early childhood teachers to do this critical work, and
 - The provision of targeted professional development to teachers and school leaders on early childhood development, learning, best practices and program needs.

This critical work is governed by the NJDOE through the NJDOE's Division of Early Childhood Education, but also by the intersecting work of multiple existing NJDOE departments (licensing, academics, facilities, etc.) **We are concerned that a new Department of Early Childhood, separate from the NJDOE, will become even more siloed in its approach, leading to more confusion in districts, duplication of effort, and inconsistent policy approaches.** This potentially makes implementation at the local level even more challenging at an already challenging time.

4. On the ground level, New Jersey schools are organized in a number of different configurations and grade levels for the provision of early childhood and elementary education. Some districts have P-K schools, P-3 schools, P-4 schools, P-8 schools or other configurations. When others who work with private community providers to provide preschool in their communities are also factored into the needs of public school providers, an integrated and aligned educational system is in everyone's interest.

It makes sense to report to the NJDOE since it already governs the vast majority of issues for the system. **We fully support a stronger focus on early childhood education and agree that this division could be significantly strengthened through a higher leadership level within the NJDOE (Assistant Commissioner level), greater funding, and increased staffing to support districts in achieving our state's educational goals for our youngest students.** Currently, the Department is significantly short-handed with over 100 vacancies cited by the Acting Commissioner during her recent budget testimony. Many staff members perform multiple roles so transferring staff to a new Department may have even greater impacts on staffing and the work of this division than originally envisioned.

Thank you for listening to our concerns today. We look forward to future discussions with Senate Majority Leader Ruiz, Assembly sponsors Lopez, Speight, Carter, and Murphy, and this committee as this legislation is considered.

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